

THE STICK-IN-THE-MUDS ¹

By RUPERT HUGHES

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A SKIFF went prowling along the Avon River in the unhurried English twilight that releases the sunset with reluctance and defers luxuriously the roll call of the stars.

The skiff floated low, for the man alone in it was heavy and he was in no greater haste than the northern night. Which was against the traditions, for he was an American, an American business man.

He was making his way through the sky-hued water stealthily lest he disturb the leisure of the swans, drowsy above their own images; lest he discourage the nightingale trying a few low flute notes in the cathedral tower of shadow that was a tree above the tomb of Shakespeare.

The American had never heard a nightingale and it was his first pilgrimage to the shrine of the actor-manager whose productions Americans curiously couple with the Bible as sacred lore.

During the day Joel Wixon had seen the sights of Stratford with the others from his country and from England and the Continent. But now he wanted to get close to Shakespeare. So he hired the skiff and declined the services of the old boat lender.

And now he was stealing up into the rich gloom the church spread across the river. He was pushing the stern of the boat foremost so that he could feast his eyes. He was making so little speed that the only sounds were the choked sob of the water where the boat cleaved it gently and the tinkle of the drops that fell from the lazy

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oars with something of the delicate music of the uncertain nightingale.

Being a successful business man, Wixon was a suffocated poet. The imagination and the passion and the orderliness that brought him money were the same energies that would have made him a success in verse. But lines were not his line, and he was inarticulate and incoherent when beauty overwhelmed him, as it did in nearly every form.

He shivered now before the immediate majesty of the scene, and the historic meanings that enriched it as with an embroidered arras. Yet he gave out no more words than an Æolian harp shuddering with ecstasy in a wind too gentle to make it audible.

In such moods he hunted solitude, for he was ashamed to be seen, afraid to be observed in the raptures that did not belong in the vocabulary of a business man.

He had talked at noon about the fact that he and Shakespeare's father were in wool, and he had annoyed a few modest Americans by comparing the petty amount of the elder Shakespeare's trade with the vast total pouring from his own innumerable looms driven with the electricity that the Shakespeares had never dreamed of.

He had redeemed himself for his pretended brag by a meek admission:

"But I'm afraid my boy will never write another 'Hamlet.'"

Yet what could he know of his own son? How little Will Shakespeare's father or his scandalized neighbors could have fancied that the scapegrace good-for-naught who left the town for the town's good would make it immortal; and, coming back to die and lie down forever beside the Avon, would bring a world of pilgrims to a new Mecca, the shrine of the supreme unique poet of all human time?

A young boy even now was sauntering the path along the other shore, so lazily tossing pebbles into the stream that the swans hardly protested. It came upon Wixon with a kind of silent lightning that Shakespeare had once

been such another boy skipping pebbles across the narrow river and peering up into the trees to find out where the nightingale lurked.

Perhaps three hundred years from now some other shrine would claim the pilgrims, the home perhaps of some American boy now groping through the amber mists of adolescence or some man as little revered by his own neighbors and rivals as the man Shakespeare was when he went back to Avon to send back to London his two plays a year to the theatres.

Being a practical man, which is a man who strives to make his visions palpable, Wixon thought of his own home town and the colony of boys that prospered there in the Middle West.

He knew that no one would seek the town because of his birth there, for he was but a buyer of fleeces, a carder of wools, a spinner of threads, and a weaver of fabrics to keep folks' bodies warm. His weaves wore well, but they wore out.

The weavers of words were the ones whose fabrics lasted beyond the power of time and mocked the moths. Was there any such spinner in Carthage to give the town eternal blazon to ears of flesh and blood? There was one who might have been the man if —

Suddenly he felt himself again in Carthage. There was a river there too; not a little bolt of chatoyant silk like the Avon, which they would have called a "crick" back there. Before Carthage ran the incomprehensible floods of old Mississippi himself, Father of Waters, deep and vast and swift. They had lately swung a weir across it to make it work — a concrete wall a mile wide and more, and its tumbling cascades spun no little mill wheels, but swirled thundering turbines that lighted cities and ran street cars a hundred miles away.

And yet it had no Shakespeare.

And yet again it might have had if —

The twilight was so deep now that he shipped his oars in the gloom and gave himself back to the past.

He was in another twilight, only it was the counter twilight between star quench and sun blaze.

Two small boys, himself one of them; his sworn chum, Luke Mellows, the other, meeting in the silent street just as the day tide seeped in from the east and submerged the stars.

Joel had tied a string to his big toe and hung it from his window. Luke had done the same. They were not permitted to explode alarm clocks and ruin the last sweets of sleep in either home. So they had agreed that the first to wake should rise and dress with stealth, slip down the dark stairs of his house, into the starlit street and over to the other's home and pull the toe cord.

On this morning Luke had been the earlier out, and his triumphant yanks had dragged Joel feet first from sleep, and from the bed and almost through the window. Joel had howled protests in shrill whispers down into the gloom, and then, untying his outraged toe, had limped into his clothes and so to the yard.

The two children, in the huge world disputed still by the night, had felt an awe of the sky and the mysteries going on there. The envied man who ran up the streets of evenings lighting the gas street lamps was abroad again already with his little ladder and his quick insect-like motions; only, now he was turning out the lights, just as a similar but invisible being was apparently running around heaven and putting out the stars.

Joel remembered saying: "I wonder if they're turnin' off the stars up there to save gas too."

Luke did not like the joke. He said, using the word "funny" solemnly: "It's funny to see light putting out light. The stars will be there all day, but we won't be able to see 'em for the sun."

(Wixon thought of this now, and of how Shakespeare's fame had drowned out so many stars. A man had told him that there were hundreds of great writers in Shakespeare's time that most people never heard of.)

As the boys paused, the air quivered with a hoarse *moo!* as of a gigantic cow bellowing for her lost calf. It was really a steamboat whistling for the bridge to open the draw and let her through to the south with her raft of logs.

Both of the boys called the boat by name, knowing her voice: "It's the Bessie May Brown!" They started on a run to the bluff overlooking the river, their short legs making a full mile of the scant furlong.

Often as Joel had come out upon the edge of that bluff on his innumerable journeys to the river for fishing, swimming, skating, or just staring, it always smote him with the thrill Balboa must have felt coming suddenly upon the Pacific.

On this morning there was an unwonted grandeur: the whole vault of the sky was curdled with the dawn, a reef of solid black in the west turning to purple and to amber and finally in the east to scarlet, with a few late planets caught in the meshes of the sunlight and trembling like dew on a spider's web.

And the battle in the sky was repeated in the sea-like river with all of the added magic of the current and the eddies and the wimpling rushes of the dawn winds.

On the great slopes were houses and farmsteads throwing off the night and in the river the Bessie May Brown, her red light and her green light trailing scarfs of color on the river, as she chuffed and clanged her bell, and smote the water with her stern wheel. In the little steeple of the pilot house a priest guided her and her unwieldy acre of logs between the piers of the bridge whose lanterns were still belatedly aglow on the girders and again in echo in the flood.

Joel filled his little chest with a gulp of morning air and found no better words for his rhapsody than: "Gee, but ain't it great?"

To his amazement, Luke, who had always been more sensitive than he, shook his head and turned away.

"Gosh, what do you want for ten cents?" Joel demanded, feeling called upon to defend the worthiness of the dawn.

Luke began to cry. He dropped down on his own bare legs in the weeds and twisted his face and his fists in a vain struggle to fight off unmanly grief.

Joel squatted at his side and insisted on sharing the secret; and finally Luke forgot the sense of family honor

long enough to yield to the yearning for company in his misery.

"I was up here at midnight last night, and I don't like this place any more."

"You didn't come all by yourself? Gee!"

"No, Momma was here too."

"What she bring you out here at a time like that for?"

"She didn't know I was here."

"Didn't know — What she doin' out here, then?"

"She and Poppa had a turble quar'l. I couldn't hear what started it, but finely it woke me up and I listened, and Momma was cryin' and Poppa was swearin'. And at last Momma said: 'Oh, I might as well go and throw myself in the river,' and Poppa said: 'Good riddance of bad rubbish!' and Momma stopped cryin' and she says: 'All right!' in an awful kind of a voice, and I heard the front door open and shut."

"Gee!"

"Well, I jumped into my shirt and pants and slid down the rain pipe and ran along the street, and there sure enough was Momma walkin' as fast as she could.

"I was afraid to go near her. I don't know why, but I was. So I just sneaked along after her. The street was black as pitch 'cep' for the street lamps, and as she passed ever' one I could see she was still cryin' and stumblin' along like she was blind.

"It was so late we didn't meet anybody at tall, and there wasn't a light in a single house except Joneses, where somebody was sick, I guess. But they didn't pay any attention, and at last she came to the bluff here. And I follered. When she got where she could see the river she stopped and stood there, and held her arms out like she was goin' to jump off or fly, or somethin'. The moon was up, and the river was so bright you could hardly look at it, and Momma stood there with her arms 'way out like she was on the Cross, or something.

"I was so scared and so cold I shook like I had a chill. I was afraid she could hear my teeth chatterin', so I dropped down in the weeds and thistles to keep her from seein' me. It was just along about here too."

"By and by Momma kind of broke like somebody had hit her, then she began to cry again and to walk up and down wringin' her hands. Once or twice she started to run down the bluff and I started to foller; but she stopped like somebody held her back, and I sunk down again.

"Then, after a long time, she shook her head like she couldn't, and turned back. She walked right by me and didn't see me. I heard her whisperin': 'I can't, I can't. My pore children!'

"Then she went back down the street and me after her, wishin' I could go up and help her. But I was afraid she wouldn't want me to know, and I just couldn't go near her."

Luke wept helplessly at the memory of his poltroonery, and Joel tried roughly to comfort him with questions.

"Gee! I don't blame you. I don't guess I could have either. But what was it all about, d'you s'pose?"

"I don't know. Momma went to the front door, and it was locked, and she stood a long, long while before she could bring herself to knock. Then she tapped on it soft like. And by and by Poppa opened the door and said: 'Oh, you're back, are you?' Then he turned and walked away, and she went in.

"I could have killed him with a rock, if she hadn't shut the door. But all I could do was to climb back up the rain pipe. I was so tired and discouraged I nearly fell and broke my neck. And I wisht I had have. But there wasn't any more quar'l, only Momma kind of whimpered once or twice, and Poppa said: 'Oh, for God's sake, shut up and lea' me sleep. I got to open the store in the mornin', ain't I?' I didn't do much sleepin', and I guess that's why I woke up first."

That was all of the story that Joel could learn. The two boys were shut out by the wall of grown-up life. Luke crouched in bitter moodiness, throwing clods of dirt at early grasshoppers and reconquering his lost dignity. At last he said: "If you ever let on to anybody what I told you —"

"Aw, say!" was Joel's protest. His knighthood as a sworn chum was put in question and he was cruelly hurt.

Luke took assurance from his dismay and said in a burst of fury: "Aw, I just said that! I know you won't tell. But just you wait till I can earn a pile of money. I'll take Momma away from that old scoundrel so fast it'll make his head swim!" Then he slumped again. "But it takes so doggone long to grow up, and I don't know how to earn anything."

Then the morning of the world caught into its irresistible vivacity the two boys in the morning of their youth, and before long they had forgotten the irremediable woes of their elders, as their elders also forgot the problems of national woes and cosmic despair.

The boys descended the sidelong path at a jog, brushing the dew and grasshoppers and the birds from the hazel bushes and the papaw shrubs, and scaring many a dewy rabbit from cover.

At the bottom of the bluff the railroad track was the only road along the river, and they began the tormenting passage over the uneven ties with cinders everywhere for their bare feet. They postponed as long as they could the delight of breakfast, and then, sitting on a pile of ties, made a feast of such hard-boiled eggs, cookies, cheese, and crackers as they had been able to wheedle from their kitchens the night before.

Their talk that morning was earnest, as boys' talk is apt to be. They debated their futures as boys are apt to do. Being American boys, two things characterized their plans: one, that the sky itself was the only limit to their ambitions; the other, that they must not follow their fathers' businesses.

Joel's father was an editor; Luke's kept a hardware store.

So Joel wanted to go into trade and Luke wanted to be a writer.

The boys wrangled with the shrill intensity of youth. A stranger passing might have thought them about to come to blows. But they were simply noisy with earnestness. Their argument was as unlike one of the debates in Vergil's Eclogues as possible. It was an antistrophe of twang and drawl:

"Gee, you durned fool, watcha want gointa business for?"

"Durned fool your own self! Watcha wanta be a writer for?"

Then they laughed wildly, struck at each other in mock hostility, and went on with their all-day walk, returning at night too weary for books or even a game of authors or checkers.

Both liked to read, and they were just emerging from the stratum of Old Cap Collier, Nick Carter, the Kid-Glove Miner, and the Steam Man into "Ivanhoe," "Scottish Chiefs," and "Cudjo's Cave." They had passed out of the Oliver Optic, Harry Castlemon, James Otis era.

Joel Wixon read for excitement; Luke Mellows for information as to the machinery of authorship.

Young as they were, they went to the theatre — to the op'ra house, which never housed opera.

Joel went often and without price, since his father, being an editor, had the glorious prerogative of "comps." Perhaps that was why Luke wanted to be a writer.

Mr. Mellows, as hard as his own ware, did not believe in the theatre and could not be bullied or wept into paying for tickets. But Luke became a program boy and got in free, a precious privilege he kept secret as long as possible, and lost as soon as his father noticed his absences from home on play nights. Then he was whipped for wickedness and ordered to give up the theatre forever.

Perhaps Luke would never suffer again so fiercely as he suffered from that denial. It meant a free education and a free revel in the frequent performances of Shakespeare, and of repertory companies that gave such triumphs as "East Lynne" and "Camille," not to mention the road companies that played the uproarious "Peck's Bad Boy," "Over the Garden Wall," "Skipped by the Light of the Moon," and the Charles Hoyt screamers.

The theatre had been a cloud-veiled Olympus of mystic exultations, of divine terrors, and of ambrosial laughter. But it was a bad influence. Mr. Mellows's theories of

right and wrong were as simple and sharp as his own knives: whatever was delightful and beautiful and laughterful was manifestly wicked, God having plainly devised the pretty things as baits for the devil's fishhooks.

Joel used to tell Luke about the plays he saw, and the exile's heart ached with envy. They took long walks up the river or across the bridge into the wonderlands that were overflowed in high-water times. And they talked always of their futures. Boyhood was a torment, a slavery. Heaven was just over the twenty-first birthday.

Joel got his future, all but the girl he planned to take with him up the grand stairway of the palace he foresaw. Luke missed his future, and his girl and all of his dreams.

Between the boys and their manhood stood, as usual, the fathers, strange monsters, ogres, who seemed to have forgotten, at the top of the beanstalk, that they had once been boys themselves down below.

After the early and unceasing misunderstandings as to motives and standards of honor and dignity came the civil war over education.

Wouldn't you just know that each boy would get the wrong dad? Joel's father was proud of Luke and not of Joel. He had printed some of Luke's poems in the paper and called him a "precocious" native genius. Joel's father wished that his boy could have had his neighbor's boy's gift. It was his sorrow that Joel had none of the artistic leanings that are called "gifts." He regretfully gave him up as one who would not carry on the torch his father had set out with. He could not force his child to be a genius, but he insisted that Joel should have an education. The editor had found himself handicapped by a lack of the mysterious enrichment that a tour through college gives the least absorbent mind. He was determined to provide it for his boy, though Joel felt that every moment's delay in leaping into the commercial arena was so much delay in arriving at gladiatorial eminence.

Luke's father had had even less education than Editor Wixon, but he was proud of it. He had never gone far in the world, but he was one of those men who are

automatically proud of everything they do and derive even from failure or humiliation a savage conceit.

He made Luke work in his store or out of it as a delivery boy during vacations from such school terms as the law required. He saw the value of education enough to make out bills and write dunning letters. "Books" to him meant the doleful books that bookkeepers keep.

As for any further learning, he thought it a waste of time, a kind of wantonness.

He felt that Providence had intentionally selected a cross for him in the son who was wicked and foolish enough to want to read stories and see plays and go to school for years instead of going right into business.

The thought of sending his boy through a preparatory academy and college and wasting his youth on nonsense was outrageous. It maddened him to have the boy plead for such folly. He tried in vain to whip it out of him.

Joel's ideas of education were exactly those of Mr. Mellows, but he did not like Mr. Mellows because of the anguish inflicted on Luke. Joel used to beg Luke to run away from home. But that was impracticable for two reasons: Luke was not of the runaway sort, but meek, and shy, and obedient to a fault.

Besides, while a boy can run away from school, he cannot easily run away to school. If he did, he would be sent back, and if he were not sent back, how was he to pay for his "tootion" and his board and books and clo'es?

It was Luke's influence that sent Joel away to boardin' school. He so longed to go himself that Joel felt it foolish to deny himself the godlike opportunity. So Luke went to school vicariously in Joel, as he got his other experiences vicariously in books.

At school Joel found so much to do outside of his classes that he grew content to go all the way. There was a glee club to manage, also an athletic club; a paper to solicit ads and subscriptions for; class officers to be elected, with all the delights of political maneuvering — a world in little to run with all the solemnity and com-

petition of the adult cosmos. So Joel was happy and lucky and successful in spite of himself.

The day after Joel took train up the river to his academy Luke took the position his father secured for him and entered the little back room where the Butterly Bottling Works kept its bookkeepers on high stools.

The Butterly soda pop, ginger ales, and other soft drinks were triumphs of insipidity, and their birch beer sickened the thirstiest child. But the making and the marketing and even the drinking of them were matters of high emprise compared to the keeping of the books.

One of the saddest, sweetest, greatest stories ever written is Ellis' Pigsispigs Butler's fable of the contented little donkey that went round and round in the mill and thought he was traveling far. But that donkey was blind and had no dreams denied.

Luke Mellows was a boy, a boy that still felt his life in every limb, a boy devoured with fantastic ambitions. He had a genius within that smothered and struggled till it all but perished unexpressed. It lived only enough to be an anguish. It hurt him like a hidden, unmentioned ingrowing toe nail that cuts and bleeds and excruciates the fleet member it is meant to protect.

When Joel came home for his first vacation, with the rush of a young colt that has had a good time in the corral but rejoices in the old pastures, his first cry was for Luke. When he learned where he was, he hurried to the Bottling Works. He was turned away with the curt remark that employees could not be seen in business hours. In those days there were no machines to simplify and verify the bookkeeper's treadmill task, and business hours were never over.

Joel left word at Luke's home for Luke to call for him the minute he was free. He did not come that evening, nor the next. Joel was hurt more than he dared admit.

It was Sunday afternoon before Luke came round, a different Luke, a lean, wan, worn-out shred of a youth. His welcome was sickly.

"Gee-min-ent-ly!" Joel roared. "I thought you was mad at me about something. You never came near."

"I wanted to come," Luke croaked, "but nights, I'm too tired to walk anywheres, and besides, I usually have to go back to the offus."

"Gee, that's damn tough," said Joel, who had grown from darn to damn.

Thinking to light Luke up with a congenial theme, Joel heroically forbore to describe the marvels of academy life, and asked: "What you been readin' lately? A little bit of everything, I guess, hey?"

"A whole lot of nothin'," Luke sighed. "I got no strength for readin' by the time I shut my ledgers. I got to save my eyes, you know. The light's bad in that back room."

"What you been writin', then?"

"Miles of figures and entries about one gross bottles lemon, two gross sassapilla, one gross empties returned."

"No more poetry?"

"No more nothin'."

Joel was obstinately cheerful. "Well, you been makin' money, anyways; that's something."

"Yeh. I buy my own shoes and clo'es now and pay my board and lodgin' at home. And paw puts the two dollars that's left into the savings bank. I got nearly thirty dollars there now. I'll soon have enough for a winter soot and overcoat."

"Gee, can't you go buggy ridin' even with Kit?"

"I could if I had the time and the price, and if her maw wasn't so poorly that Kitty can't get away. I go over there Sunday afternoons sometimes, but her maw always hollers for her to come in. She's afraid to be alone. Kit's had to give up the high school account of her maw."

"How about her goin' away to be a great singer?"

Luke grinned at the insanity of such childish plans. "Oh, that's all off. Kit can't even practice any more. It makes her mother nervous. And Kit had to give up the church choir too. You'd hardly know her. She cries a lot about lookin' so scrawny. O' course I tell her she's pirtier than ever, but that only makes her mad. She can't go to sociables or dances or picnics, and if she could

she's got no clo'es. We don't have much fun together; just sit and mope, and then I say: 'Well, guess I better mosey on home,' and she says: 'All right; see you again next Sunday, I s'pose. G'by.'"

The nightingale annoyed the owl and was hushed, and the poet rimed sums in a daybook.

The world waited for them and needed them without knowing it; it would have rewarded them with thrilled attention and wealth and fame. But silence was their portion, silence and the dark and an ache that had no voice.

Joel listened to Luke's elegy and groaned: "Gee!"

But he had an optimism like a powerful spring, and it struck back now with a whirl: "I'll tell you what, Luke. Just you wait till I'm rich, then I'll give you a job as vice president, and you can marry Kitty and live on Broadway, in Noo York."

"I've got over believin' in Sandy Claus," said Luke.

Joel saw little of him during this vacation and less during the next. Being by nature a hater of despair, he avoided Luke. He had fits of remorse for this, and once he dared to make a personal appeal to old Mr. Mellows to send Luke away to school. He was received with scant courtesy, and only tolerated because he gave the father a chance to void some of his bile at the worthlessness of Luke.

"He's no good; that's what's the matter of him. And willful too — he just mopes around because he wants to show me I'm wrong. But he's only cuttin' off his own nose to spite his face. I'll learn him who's got the most will power."

Joel was bold enough to suggest: "Maybe Luke would be differ'nt if you'd let him go to college. You know, Mr. Mellows, if you'll 'scuse my saying it, there's some natures that are differ'nt from others. You hitch a race horse up to a plow and you spoil a good horse and your field both. Seems to me as if, if Luke got a chance to be a writer or a professor or something, he might turn out to be a wonder. You can't teach a canary bird to be a hen, you know, and —"

Mr. Mellows locked himself in that ridiculous citadel of ancient folly. "When you're as old as I am, Joel, you'll know more. The first thing anybody's got to learn in this world is to respect their parents."

Joel wanted to say: "I should think that depended on the parents."

But, of course, he kept silent, as the young usually do when they hear the old maundering, and he gave up as he heard the stupid dolt returning to his old refrain: "I left school when I was twelve years old. Ain't had a day sence, and I can't say as I've been exactly a failure. Best hardware store in Carthage and holdin' my own in spite of bad business."

Joel slunk away, unconvinced but baffled. One summer he brought all his pressure to bear on Luke to persuade him to run away from his job and strike out for the big city where the big opportunities grew.

But Luke shook his head. He lacked initiative. Perhaps that was where his talent was not genius. It blistered him, but it made no steam.

Shakespeare had known enough to leave Stratford. He had had to hold horses outside the theatre, and even then he had organized a little business group of horse holders called "Shakespeare's boys." He had the business sense, and he forced his way into the theatre and became a stockholder. Shakespeare was always an adventurer. He had to work in a butcher's shop, but before he was nineteen he was already married to a woman of twenty-six, and none too soon for the first child's sake.

Luke Mellows had not the courage or the recklessness to marry Kitty, though he had as good a job as Shakespeare's. Shakespeare would not let a premature family keep him from his ambition.

He was twenty-one when he went to London, but he went.

London was a boom town then, about the size of Trenton, or Grand Rapids, or Spokane, and growing fast. Boys were running away from the farms and villages as they always have done. Other boys went to London from Stratford. John Sadler became a big wholesale

grocer, and Richard Field a publisher. They had as various reasons then as now.

But the main thing was that they left home. That might mean a noble or a selfish ambition, but it took action.

Luke Mellows would not go. He dreaded to abandon his mother to the father who bullied them both. He could not bear to leave Kitty alone with the wretched mother who ruled her with tears.

Other boys ran or walked away from Carthage, some of them to become failures, and some half successes, and some of them to acquire riches and power. And other boys stayed at home.

Girls, too, had won obscurity by inertia or had swung into fame. Some of the girls had stayed at home and gone wrong there. Some had gone away in disgrace, and redeemed or damned themselves in larger parishes. There were Aspasia and Joans of Arc in miniature, minor Florence Nightingales and Melbas and Rosa Bonheurs. But they had all had to leap from the nest and try their wings. Of those that did not take the plunge, none made the flight.

Cowardice held some back, but the purest self-sacrifice others. Joel felt that there ought to be a heaven for these latter, yet he hoped that there was no hell for the former. For who can save himself from his own timidity, and who can protect himself from his own courage?

Given that little spur of initiative, that little armor of selfish indifference to the clinging hands at home, and how many a soul might not have reached the stars? Look at the women who were crowding the rolls of fame of late just because all womankind had broken free of the apron strings of alleged respectability.

Joel had no proof that Luke Mellows would have amounted to much. Perhaps, if he had ventured over the nest's edge, he would have perished on the ground, trampled into dust by the fameward mob, or devoured by the critics that pounce upon every fledgling and suck the heart out of all that cannot fling them off.

But Joel could not surrender his childhood faith that Luke Mellows had been meant for another Shakespeare.

Yet Mellows had never written a play or an act of a play. But, for that matter, neither had Shakespeare before he went to London. He was only a poet at first, and some of his poems were pretty poor stuff—if you took Shakespeare's name off it. And his first poems had to be published by his fellow townsman Field.

There were the childish poems by Luke Mellows that Joel's father had published in the Carthage "Clarion." Joel had forgotten them utterly, and they were probably meritorious of oblivion. But there was one poem Luke had written that Joel memorized.

It appeared in the "Clarion" years after Joel was a success in wool. His father still sent him the paper, and in one number Joel was rejoiced to read these lines:

THE ANONYMOUS

By LUKE MELLOWS

Sometimes at night within a wooded park
 Like an ocean cavern, fathoms deep in bloom,
 Sweet scents, like hymns, in hidden flowers fume,
 And make the wanderer happy, though the dark
 Obscures their tint, their name, their shapely bloom.

So, in the thick-set chronicles of fame,
 There hover deathless feats of souls unknown.
 They linger like the fragrant smoke wreaths blown
 From liberal sacrifice. Gone face and name;
 The deeds, like homeless ghosts, live on alone.

Wixon, seated in the boat on Avon and lost in such dusk that he could hardly see his hand upon the idle oar, recited the poem softly to himself, intoning it in the deep voice one saves for poetry. It sounded wonderful to him in the luxury of hearing his own voice upon the water and indulging his own memory. The somber mood was perfect, in accord with the realm of shadow and silence where everything beautiful and living was cloaked in the general blur.

After he had heard his voice chanting the last long oh's of the final verse, he was ashamed of his solemnity, and terrified lest some one might have heard him and

accounted him insane. He laughed at himself for a sentimental fool.

He laughed too as he remembered what a letter of praise he had dictated to his astonished stenographer and fired off at Luke Mellows; and at the flippant letter he had in return.

Lay readers who send incandescent epistles to poets are apt to receive answers in sardonic prose. The poet lies a little, perhaps, in a very sane suspicion of his own transcendencies.

Luke Mellows had written :

“DEAR OLD JOEL:

“I sure am much obliged for your mighty handsome letter. Coming to one of the least successful wool-gatherers in the world from one of the most successful wool distributors, it deserves to be highly prized. And is. I will have it framed and handed down to my heirs, of which there are more than there will ever be looms.

“You ask me to tell you all about myself. It won't take long. When the Butterly Bottlery went bust, I had no job at all for six months, so I got married to spite my father. And to please Kit, whose poor mother ceased to suffer about the same time.

“The poor girl was so used to taking care of a poor old woman who couldn't be left alone that I became her patient just to keep all her talents from going to waste.

“The steady flow of children seems to upset the law of supply and demand, for there is certainly no demand for more of my progeny and there is no supply for them. But somehow they thrive.

“I am now running my father's store, as the old gentleman had a stroke and then another. The business is going to pot as rapidly as you would expect, but I haven't been able to kill it off quite yet.

“Thanks for advising me to go on writing immortal poetry. If I were immortal, I might, but that fool thing was the result of about ten years' hard labor. I tried to make a sonnet of it, but I gave up at the end of the decade and called it whatever it is.

"Your father's paper published it free of charge, and so my income from my poetry has been one-tenth of nothing per annum. Please don't urge me to do any more. I really can't afford it.

"The poem was suggested to me by an ancient fit of blues over the fact that Kit's once-so-beautiful voice would never be heard in song, and by the fact that her infinite goodnesses will never meet any recompense or even acknowledgment.

"I was bitter the first five years, but the last five years I began to feel how rich this dark old world is in good, brave, sweet, lovable, heartbreakingly beautiful deeds that simply cast a little fragrance on the dark and are gone. They perfume the night and the busy daylight dispels them like the morning mists that we used to watch steaming and vanishing above the old river. The Mississippi is still here, still rolling along its eternal multitudes of snows and flowers and fruits and fish and snakes and dead men and boats and trees.

"They go where they came from, I guess — in and out of nothing and back again.

"It is a matter of glory to all of us that you are doing so nobly. Keep it up and give us something to brag about in our obscurity. Don't worry. We are happy enough in the dark. We have our batlike sports and our owl-like prides, and the full sun would blind us and lose us our way.

"Kit sends you her love — and blushes as she says it. That is a very daring word for such shy moles as we are, but I will echo it.

"Yours for old sake's sake. LUKE."

Vaguely remembering this letter now Joel inhaled a bit of the merciful chloroform that deadens the pain of thwarted ambition.

The world was full of men and women like Luke and Kit. Some had given up great hopes because they were too good to tread others down in their quest. Some had quenched great talents because they were too fearsome or too weak or too lazy to feed their lamps with oil and

keep them trimmed and alight. Some had stumbled through life darkly with no gifts of talent, without even appreciation of the talents of others or of the flowerlike beauties that star the meadows.

Those were the people he had known. And then there were the people he had not known, the innumerable caravan that had passed across the earth while he lived, the inconceivable hosts that had gone before, tribe after tribe, generation upon generation, nation at the heels of nation, cycle on era on age, and the backward perpetuity from everlasting unto everlasting. People, people, peoples — poor souls, until the thronged stars that make a dust of the Milky Way were a lesser mob.

Here in this graveyard at Stratford lay men who might have overtopped Shakespeare's glory if they had but "had a mind to." Some of them had been held in higher esteem in their town. But they were forgotten, their names leveled with the surface of their fallen tombstones.

Had he not cried out in his own Hamlet: "O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams — which dreams indeed are ambition; for the very substance of the ambitious is merely the shadow of a dream — and I hold ambition of so airy and light a quality that it is but a shadow's shadow."

After all, the greatest of men were granted but a lesser oblivion than the least. And in that overpowering thought there was a strange comfort, the comfort of misery finding itself in an infinite company.

The night was thick upon Avon. The swans had gone somewhere. The lights in the houses had a sleepy look. It was time to go to bed.

Joel yawned with the luxury of having wearied his heart with emotion. He had thought himself out for once. It was good to be tired. He put his oars into the stream and, dipping up reflected stars, sent them swirling in a doomsday chaos after him with the defiant revenge of a proud soul who scorns the universe that grinds him to dust.

The old boatman was surly with waiting. He did not thank the foreigner for his liberal largeness, and did not answer his good night.

As Wixon left the river and took the road for his hotel, the nightingale (that forever anonymous nightingale, only one among the millions of forgotten or throttled songsters) revolted for a moment or two against the stifling doom and shattered it with a wordless sonnet of fierce and beautiful protest — "The tawny-throated! What triumph! hark! — what pain!"

It was as if Luke Mellows had suddenly found expression in something better than words, something that any ear could understand, an ache that rang.

Wixon stopped, transfixed as by flaming arrows. He could not understand what the bird meant or what he meant, nor could the bird. But as there is no laughter that eases the heart like unpacking it of its woes in something beyond wording, so there is nothing that brightens the eyes like tears gushing without shame or restraint.

Joel Wixon felt that it was a good, sad, mad world, and that he had been very close to Shakespeare — so close that he heard things nobody had ever found the phrases for — things that cannot be said but only felt, and transmitted rather by experience than by expression from one proud worm in the mud to another.